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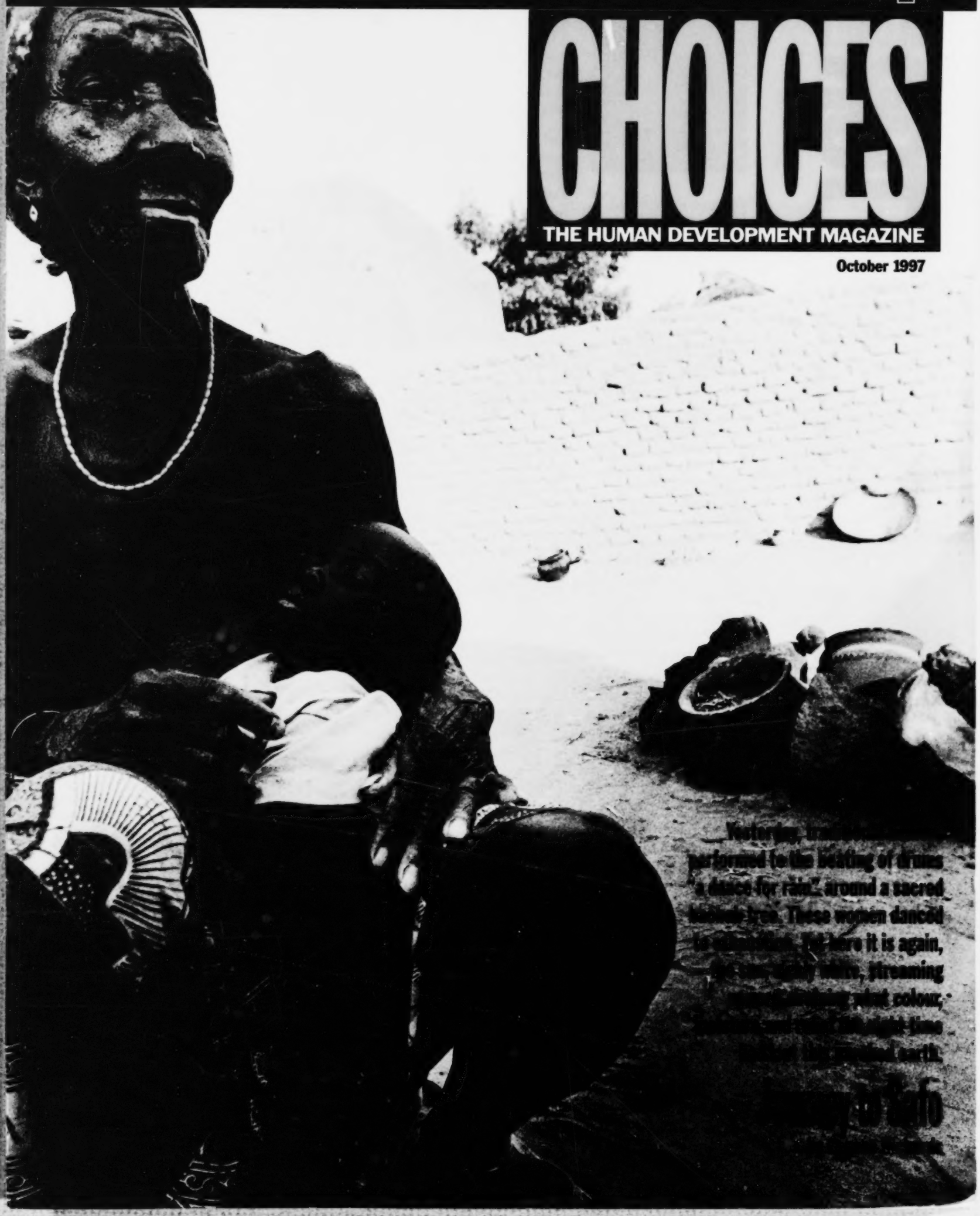
CHOICES

THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT MAGAZINE

October 1997



Yesterday, [illegible] performed to the beating of drums "a dance for rain", around a sacred baobab tree. These women danced to [illegible]. But here it is again, [illegible] streaming [illegible] what colour; [illegible] the planet [illegible] the [illegible] earth.

FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

People always felt good when they were with Andriamirado Sennen, a veteran Malagasy journalist for *Jeune Afrique*. I remember having breakfast with him one morning in December 1996 at a ridiculously early hour in a hotel in Bamako, Mali. While we spoke, Sennen and I must have been interrupted half a dozen times by waiters. But on each occasion, Sennen responded with his usual charm and politeness, never losing his cool. Despite all the distractions, he managed to stay focused on our agenda: to talk about ways to strengthen the African media. Because of his 20 years of journalism experience and his knowledge of the region, Sennen could speak authoritatively about any aspect of the African press.

At the time, Sennen was in Mali for a UNDP workshop on the African dimension of the 1996 *Human Development Report*. At the end of the session, Sennen, a tireless champion for the cause of Africa, agreed that we must dispel the myths perpetuated by "Afro-pessimists" that Africa is a lost continent.

Together, we promised to do our best to portray Africa as a series of "islands of hope," to remind the outside world that progress is taking place despite some of the more obvious tragedies.

Last July, I was devastated to learn that Andriamirado Sennen had passed away in Paris. Only weeks earlier he had joined me on a travelling seminar to Senegal and Guinea. The purpose of the trip, featured in this issue of CHOICES, was to show the international press some real-life examples of how development in Africa *is* working. I regret that Sennen is not alive today to see some of the positive coverage we helped generate.

Earlier in the spring I had led another group of journalists to South Africa, to see yet another island of hope—one which was once literally an island of despair.

During the apartheid era, Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town, had been used by the government as a prison to isolate anyone perceived as a threat to white rule. The government recently converted the prison into an open-air museum, now a national symbol for the struggle against apartheid.

The journalists and I went to Robben Island by one of the ferries that used to transport dozens of prisoners there every day. With us was Wiseman Mdlalana, who was recently released from Robben after more than a decade of forced labour. As a young man of 21, Mdlalana had been convicted for possession of arms in his Township of Guguletu. But like a number of his former cell mates, Mdlalana has traded his title as political prisoner for tour guide.

For about an hour, we retraced Mdlalana's steps as a convict on the island. Prisoners locked up for committing crimes—often violent ones—were often put together with political prisoners, a tactic used by jailers to incite violence among the detained. Mdlalana knew no one the night he arrived on the island. But the morning after, he met other members of the African National Congress (ANC), the party of Nelson Mandela, who had been among those sentenced to Robben.

For 14 of his 19 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela occupied cell number five in the infamous "Section B," where ANC leaders were held. We also visited the lime quarry where Mandela and everyone else sentenced to years of hard labour spent much of their time.

When asked how he felt being back in a place that had once been his prison, Mdlalana responded simply, "We want to show the rest of the world that reconciliation is possible."

Mdlalana's reaction explains, perhaps, the world's continued fascination with a country where the once oppressed can take the hand of their former enemy and work together for the future of their country. This is what Nelson Mandela had wanted and that is the message that is being adopted. As David Whaley, UNDP's resident representative in South Africa, reminded us, "it's hope and optimism that are going to change things, not vengeance."

And there is plenty of hope today on Robben Island.

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

▸ **The late Andriamirado Sennen (right) and UNDP project coordinator El Hadj Abdourahamane Bah, in Guinea.**

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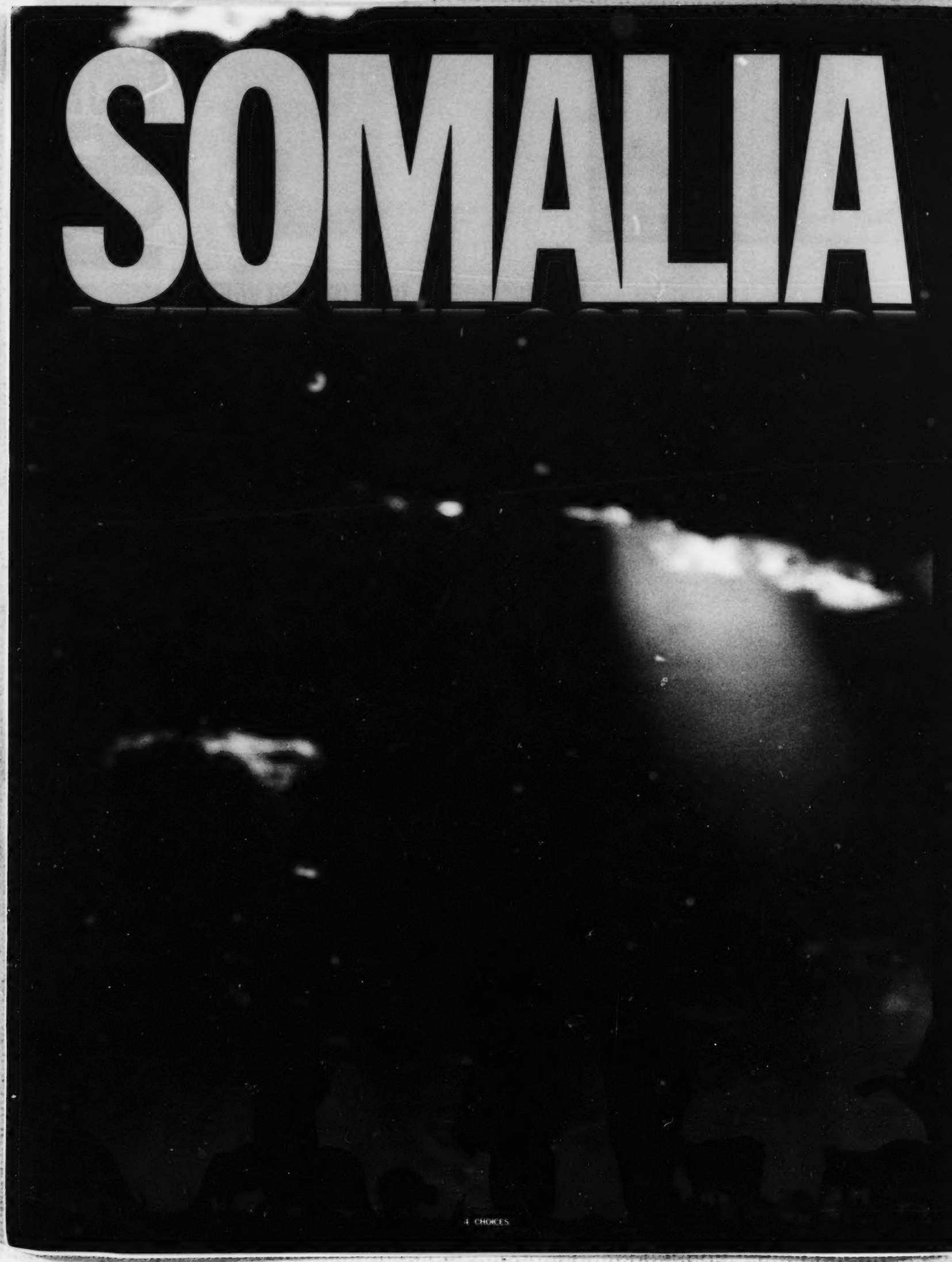


PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR MELLO/UNOPS

By Ilene R. Prusher

The failure of the international community to restore peace in Somalia made headlines worldwide. Less well known are the efforts of UN agencies to address the needs of the Somali people in the absence of a recognized government and an almost total breakdown of law and order.

Ishkushuban—Once Somalia had a government and civil institutions, and Col. Said Mahmud had a paying job. As chief of police in the district of Ishkushuban, in northeastern Somalia, his headquarters were here at the large former military compound built by the Italians, who occupied part of Somalia in the 1920s.

Today, what remains of the Tuscan-yellow compound are eerie tatters of a statehood past. The shells of two gas station pumps stand like idle scarecrows. A faded post office sign is evidence that someone once delivered the mail. Roofless rooms awash in debris are reminders that after looters took the office furniture and anything else of apparent value, they took every window, door and removable tidbit they could carry away. Like almost every piece of public property in Somalia, the building was pillaged to its very core in the chaos that ensued after the fall of dictator Siad Barre in 1991. This skeleton of a former life would be a complete ghost town on the edge of a village were it not for a few refugee families who have since squatted in the compound. They sought shelter from the civil war that has dwindled to a battle among warlords, sometimes within their own clans, in the ravaged capital, Mogadishu.

The colonel—who got to keep his title, if nothing else—knows that life should be better than it is in Ishkushuban and the rest of Somalia. Trained in Italy, he has seen the world outside. His rural village never enjoyed the facilities of Mogadishu before its devastation, but it did have such things as a generator for electricity, a government-run agriculture cooperative, basic sanitation, a community centre, a school and some semblance of law and order.

"All those young people who did the looting—we disagree with what they did and have attempted to confront that kind of behaviour," says Col. Mahmud, whose eyes have become a pale, milky blue with age.

"The civil war is over, but there are a lot of problems because of the collapse of the state," he says. "Our community grew by 30 per cent because of the refugees who came to live with relatives or in temporary buildings. But the village lacked basic resources to sustain that kind of growth," he adds. "There is a big difference when there is a government and when there is not. There were job opportunities, living standards were good," he says, baring four silver teeth, a tell-tale sign that people here once had access to dental care too.

Now that much of the looting has stopped, long after most of the world has washed its hands of Somalia and given up trying to restore peace to this war-torn East African country, fundamental questions have emerged about how to approach the formidable task of rebuilding it, or at least alleviating its suffering. How does a foreign aid agency even attempt to undertake development projects when, unlike most places in the world, there isn't even a functioning central government to act as a partner? How does one rebuild trust with a public so disappointed by international interlopers that people initially shun, fight or laugh off attempts to cooperate with them?

Long after most of the world has washed its hands of Somalia, fundamental questions have emerged about how to rebuild it.

It is *Hagga*, the scorching summer season in Ishkushuban, when I set out to find answers to these questions. Temperatures are hovering near 46 degrees Celsius, and it is difficult to move in the midday sun. As the colonel mops his brow with an errant flap of his *keffiyeh*, the cotton headdress he wears to block out the sun, I am reminded that this place was once nearly deserted at this time each year. Most residents would move temporarily to Mogadishu, over 1,000 kilometres away, where the climate is much more tolerable. These days, the people of Ishkushuban stay put for fear of moving south, and village elders like the colonel try to figure out how to absorb new residents who have fled relentless fighting in the capital. Among the many who were forced into this flight—reversing a long-standing trend of migration to Mogadishu—is Anab Ali Jama.

When I ask Anab what she remembers about the civil war that brought her here, she talks of watching friends and neighbours die. And the *katyusha* rockets falling on her house. Going without food for several days. Moving from one place to another in search of shelter. But the day that most plagues her memory was the one when she heard a knock on her door. Anab had not been outside for almost two months.

"I asked who it was," she recalls. The only answer was the sound of a gun being cocked. "The looters came and defiled us and took everything they found. Two of us were raped and got

◂ **Col. Said Mahmud**
▾ **Anab Ali Jama**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR MELLO/UNDP/S

Squatters now occupy destroyed government buildings in Bossaso.

pregnant." That was when, after trying to survive the war in Mogadishu for a year, she and her family finally fled.

But not for the first time. Originally from the northwest of Somalia, she left her native region for Mogadishu in 1988 when then president Barre tried to crush rebels in the emerging civil war there. Several years later, the road to safety took two months of open-air truck rides into Ethiopia—travelling through the middle of Somalia was too dangerous—until she finally reached Ishkushuban in 1992, where she was to be reunited with her husband. Two days after she arrived, he was killed fighting against Muslim fundamentalists who tried to fill the power vacuum left in the wake of a disintegrating state.

Left a destitute and widowed mother of eight, it wasn't clear how she would survive. Now, sitting in her thatched-hut shop, she describes how she launched a business with a small loan dispersed by a local women's organization.

About a hundred women in this village have received similar loans—most around US$130 each—through a project financed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). All have had to pay back their debts within a year. They've used the money for everything from opening cafes, butcher shops and bakeries to operating small farming businesses. Priority went to displaced women, widows and divorcees who were chosen by the women's group.

A visitor to Somalia doesn't need to ask why most of the loan recipients are women. After the collapse of the socialist state economy, the private sector has been expanding and is run almost entirely by mothers, wives and daughters. In the cities, men are often either in militias or unemployed, while in rural areas they spend much of the day in discussion while women run not just their homes but the entire marketplace.

Anab's two loans totalling 2.5 million shillings (about $350) have been repaid. "First I started with onions and potatoes, and then I expanded to sell other foods, clothes and shampoo. I built up my business little by little," she says with a hearty laugh that I don't expect from someone who has been through such misfortune. But if Anab is the Somali tragedy incarnate, its blows have somehow spared her soft face and ability to smile.

Having once lived a better life, she knows how much room there is for improvement. "I would like to see them increase the amount of credit we're able to get. We would like to have electricity here, like there once was. We need training to improve our skills." When I ask her what subjects would be useful, she names practical ones: health, tailoring, office management.

The microcredit programme is just one of several ongoing projects in Ishkushuban funded by UNDP. Others include the construction of a fence to stop soil erosion—a major issue for a community that survives primarily through agriculture and livestock—as well as building public latrines and rehabilitating the community centre. Agricultural specialists also provided generators for pumps to create a basic irrigation system that makes better use of freshwater springs near the farms.

One answer to the Somalia development puzzle, field workers here are finding, is going directly to small communities—and to keep going back. The Somalia Rural Rehabilitation Programme, of which the microcredit scheme is part, targets villages that have absorbed the brunt of displaced persons fleeing the civil war, as well as totally undeveloped regions so remote that they had little government assistance even when there was an administration. With a budget of just over $5 million a year since 1994, the programme serves some two million people in about a third of Somalia's 88 districts. The northeast region, one of the country's more stable areas, receives about a third of the resources.

With such limited funds, who decides what a village needs most? The process begins with communities themselves: residents of an entire village—including men, women and children—are persuaded to agree on a ranked, prioritized

One answer to the Somalia development puzzle is going directly to small communities, and to keep going back.

list of their most pressing needs. The village then chooses a steering committee of five or six members, a working group based on the Somali tradition of the *shir*, or assembly of elders, which makes decisions for the community. Without completely diverging from established norms, such steering committees have had some success in thwarting less salutary facets of Somali history: underneath ubiquitous clan rivalries, it's every man and every woman for themselves.

A formula that sounds simple is actually a fundamental change from the way development used to work in Somalia, where many nationals point to unequal aid distribution or clan "favouritism" as an underlying cause of the civil war. Historically, a "representative" who would show up at an aid organization's office in the

city might be the only one to profit at the end of the day. The office was often far away from the middleman's home village, if he was a resident of it at all.

"In the past, one person in charge would just use the money or equipment that was offered as his own, and not bring it back to the community. Before, a person could take all of this for himself," says Col. Mahmud, as he watches a load of shiny new wheelbarrows and farm implements being distributed at Ishkushuban's newly-renovated community centre. Crossing a pair of legs only a hair wider than the cane he walks with, he explains why using this approach made a difference in Ishkushuban. "If that happened now, the people would know better and say: 'You received the project in the name of the village, so you can't use it just for yourself.' Now, we're all sharing in the output."

But getting to the point where there is an earnest steering committee can itself be a tortuous process. "They think the UN is sitting on bags of money, so initially they tend to pick the guys who will get the most for his sub-clan," says Gary Helseth of the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), which is managing the rehabilitation programme on behalf of UNDP. "Later, they often shift positions around to put people in who are qualified to be there." Even then, he says, those who do get involved are sometimes treated like lackeys with jibes like "hey, there's your UN people coming." Long-nursed suspicions become even more difficult to overcome when villagers learn that they are expected to chip in labour and funds, for example, to build schools or clinics. Says Helseth: "They've been through a colonial past and Siad Barre; they have a tradition of people ripping them off. It's hard to get that trust."

When those factors are added to what is already an extremely individualistic, semi-nomadic society, it is difficult to bring about some kind of public accountability for the aid that is given out. A pivotal step is the creation of public forums to review the way things have been done and to inhibit corruption. Such sessions have worked in communities like Ishkushuban, but there are no guarantees. In one village, a member of the steering committee who was one of the community's most respected elders ran off with $2,000 entrusted to him for a project and never returned. "In a place where there's no government, no law and order to make people accountable," asks one field officer here, "how do you make people accountable to the UN?"

As we leave Ishkushuban the village guard lets us pass through his post, a makeshift checkpoint consisting of his *kalashnikov* rifle, two rusty trash cans and a crooked metal pole set between them. I am told he is here only to collect fees from delivery trucks that periodically come to town. Though four different sub-clans are potential rivals for power in Ishkushuban, there has been and still is no real fighting here. But in trying to piece their community together again, there is some reflection.

"People thought that what was public property was nobody's property, or that it belonged to the dictatorship," says Omar Haji Dirie, one of UNOPS' leading Somali field officers. "They realize now that what they did was a crime against themselves. I am always trying to inculcate that public buildings are public property, they don't belong to the outgoing government. Some of them feel ashamed."

It will be nearly a full day's drive in a land rover until we get to our next destination: the village of Harago, population 700. Though it's not far as the crow flies, there isn't a paved road in sight, and the jagged dirt paths stretch before us for what seems like an eternity. The land in this part of the country is flat, dry and cruel, laden with a galaxy of rocks that are like dead stars, useless. Each one seems a reminder of Somalia's fallen star, the Islamic-green constellation on a flag representing a republic that, as far as the international community is concerned, doesn't exist.

Somalia's most fertile region is in the south, the so-called "bread basket" of a nation where only two per cent of the land is arable. But it is also one of the least stable areas of the country, still enmeshed in violence that frustrates distribution of ample food resources. Some sense of order is enjoyed in the northwest region called Somaliland, whose strongman-turned-governor has declared an independent state yet to be recognized by anyone. Here in the northeast, a succession of transitional administrations have met with little success. "The problem is that all of these guys are self-appointed, and none of them have constituencies," says Dominik Langenbacher, UNDP's resident representative for Somalia.

At times, the blanched earth looks almost lunar. Elsewhere, scrub and squat, thorny acacia trees spring up sporadically over cracked soil that seems to cry for more shade. But when I arrive in Harago I learn that some rains do grace these stretches of barren land. We know they have been here because as soon as we arrive, the villagers tell us that Harago is currently surrounded by stagnant water puddles and their time-honoured cronies, the mosquitoes.

"There's malaria here," Asha Ali tells me matter-of-factly as she invites me into her home of sticks and dried mud. "There are already children getting sick with it who are going to die soon."

To alleviate the complete lack of health care here, UNOPS built a clinic that was to be shared by a few of the area's villages. But one of the harshest difficulties with Harago and other places like it is that they are so remote. So far, they haven't been able to find anyone willing to staff the clinic.

Now that there are just women around, Asha lifts off the black face veil that she wears over her floor-length, blue *hejab* to reveal a flawless complexion. Though just 21 and not yet a mother—atypical for a married woman her age—Asha holds important status in Harago. Around her

SOMALIA

AFTER THE COLLAPSE

Loans were used to buy farming tools in Harago.

For those like Asha who came here as refugees, the biggest tragedy was the lack of schools.

finger, she swings a key to one of the only locked rooms in the village. Indeed, the room with new radio communications equipment is one of the few places of enough value to invite theft.

The equipment that was brought to Harago four months ago has given the isolated village basic contact with the outside world. Improving communications countrywide is part of UNDP's plan to rehabilitate infrastructure destroyed during the war. But in the process, staff are coming across places like Harago, which never had any communications facilities—nor much government investment—at all.

Which doesn't mean villagers don't know what they're missing. Asha, who fled Mogadishu with her family when she was 14, was chosen by the others to be a radio operator because she was educated and literate. Now, she earns a small income from residents and people from area villages who pay her for calls—to loved ones elsewhere, to urban areas for emergency supplies.

For those like Asha who came here as refugees, the biggest tragedy was the lack of schools in these rural villages. Study of the Koran, usually just for boys, was taught under a tree. This year, a two-room schoolhouse built with UNDP-provided materials gave learning a permanent place.

With even these small improvements, those who were born here feel their lot has improved since the regime's collapse. "When there was still a government, this area was neglected and marginalized," says Maimoun, Asha's friend and colleague in the radio room. "Before, we had no school and no government institutions," she says.

"But our expectations are much higher than that," says Asha. "We need a public health programme. So many women here die in childbirth." Curious older women who have joined us listen and weave their *dirin*, a type of straw mat that I will sleep on tonight. When I ask, they defend the practice that creates so many of their daughters' health problems in the first place: female genital mutilation, practiced widely in Somalia.

Soon, Asha politely cuts off conversation; it is time for evening prayers. She and two friends begin in unison, a trio in blue, green and grey cloaks. I watch them bow and kneel slightly out of sync, listening to the sounds of fabric swishing rapidly with each supplication. In the face of adversity, many Somalis find solace in Islam. When development workers asked the villagers what their strategy was for dealing with water shortages, they answered frankly: "Pray to Allah."

And yet, with generosity, they offer me a shower to refresh before dinner: it is a bucket of cool water to pour over my head in a roofless outhouse—another novelty in Harago. After the community identified public health as a top priority, UNDP provided materials and expertise and left the villagers to build the latrines themselves.

Later, an elderly woman who seems to be carrying all of her possessions on her back points and screams when she sees me, scolding her neighbours for letting foreigners into the village. The others tell me to ignore her—she was never able to find her family after the war and went insane. But UN officials here have had whole villages react in similar xenophobic fashion, and they are the villages that simply, sadly, get left behind.

After dark, we eat dinner by the glow of paraffin lamps. Asha serves me spaghetti, a staple inherited from the Italians. She twirls the oily pasta around her right hand in a motion that almost seems to have evolved into an art form. After dinner I watch the Somalis clean their teeth with thick twigs, which often leave tender, benign splinters on their lips.

Asha brings me *oonsi* before bed, a mixture of sugar, spices, perfumes and incense that is burned in an earthenware vase. She says it will make the room smell good, and I have hopes that the fragrant smoke will also live up to its promise to keep away the mosquitoes. But it does not, and through the night we are tortured by tiny pests buzzing in our ears and seizing vulnerable flesh. They defy my mosquito repellent and dig in, and I spend the hours thinking of the people here with no access to luxuries like anti-malarial drugs or nets.

The Somali day starts before dawn, landing me in a power breakfast with the village elders shortly afterward. Yusef, the dominant personality on the steering committee, describes the changes in Harago. "We didn't receive many direct benefits from the government, but the fact that it was there was a deterrent to lawlessness." The only thing the villagers miss, they say, are the state-run mobile units that would periodically arrive to distribute medicines and veterinary services.

Now, through public forums, they are prioritizing what to do next. "We've generated more trust among ourselves, and in our attitude towards the UN agencies," Yusef says.

Before we leave, the UNOPS agricultural specialist will tell the villagers to put edible oils on the wells and puddles to kill the mosquito larvae; schoolchildren will receive new notebooks, and development workers will quietly question the "sustainability" mantra. In a distant village like this, how is anyone supposed to buy their own notebook or textbook when the UN or other aid agency stops coming?

"Development is more possible here than in a place like Bossaso," Omar tells me as I wave goodbye to Asha. "You have fewer guns, and the clan structures are working as a social support. There's more of a sense of community. In Bossaso, everyone thinks he should have a piece of the pie."

Bossaso, now a major city on the Gulf of Aden, was once no bigger than Harago. Refugees, many of them former Mogadishans, have swelled the popula-

Asha Ali (centre) checks the solar-powered battery for the community radio in Harago.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR MELLO/UNDP

SOMALIA
AFTER THE COLLAPSE

tion to upwards of 300,000. The newly homeless have settled into the empty banks and government buildings. Thousands of shanty homes and chicken-wire shacks now share the streets with trash piles that expand daily. They provide the grazing ground for goats that pick at old papers and add to the stench of urine and rotting garbage that hangs heavily in the humid sea air.

What makes Bossaso so different and development programmes here so difficult is that it is such a large place—a patchwork of people from all over Somalia. The approaches that work in the villages often don't apply in the city. One Somali who knows I am originally from New York bounces my question back at me: "What do you think would happen if there were no government there?"

Even if it means living in seemingly more hostile conditions, people have come to Bossaso because there is more "there" here. "Bossaso," quips one official, "is working—for those who can afford it." Entrepreneurs provide private if deficient schools, hospitals, pharmacies, phones, electricity—even a post office. An open-air market offers produce, fabrics and jewelry. Bankers sit on flour bags full of devalued Somali shillings, which weaken against the dollar every day. And any Somali who didn't get a passport made before the war can get one crafted here.

Most importantly, Bossaso has a resource that is potentially the biggest source of income for the entire region: a natural seaport. With the port of Mogadishu still closed, Bossaso has become a main point of entry for food and other goods from abroad. For this reason, despite the obstacles, rehabilitating Bossaso has been deemed a crucial project worth the effort.

Recognizing its importance, UNDP and the European Union have put priority on renovating and stabilizing the port. And since June 1996, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has had the daunting task of trying to institute some form of governance, financial transparency and security at the port by working through a temporary, clan-based administration controlled by the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), the area's main political faction.

But when I get to the waterfront, the nuances of anarchy unfold. Another shooting has just taken place, a persistent problem when five armed sub-clans vie for control over the same territory. A 150-man militia provides "security" for the port, but officials here say that no more than 30 men are needed; the rest are just a means to provide jobs and maintain clan balance. A broken-down vessel takes up a third of the main jetty; the administration refused UNCTAD's calls to remove it because they didn't want to provoke another sub-clan. The port still has no storage facilities or cranes that could greatly expand capacity. But the fact that there is any kind of management at all is an improvement from the true free-for-all the port was until last year. UNCTAD has built a structure that will serve as a treasury and persuaded the administration to institute a basic accounting system from which it can eventually collect tariffs.

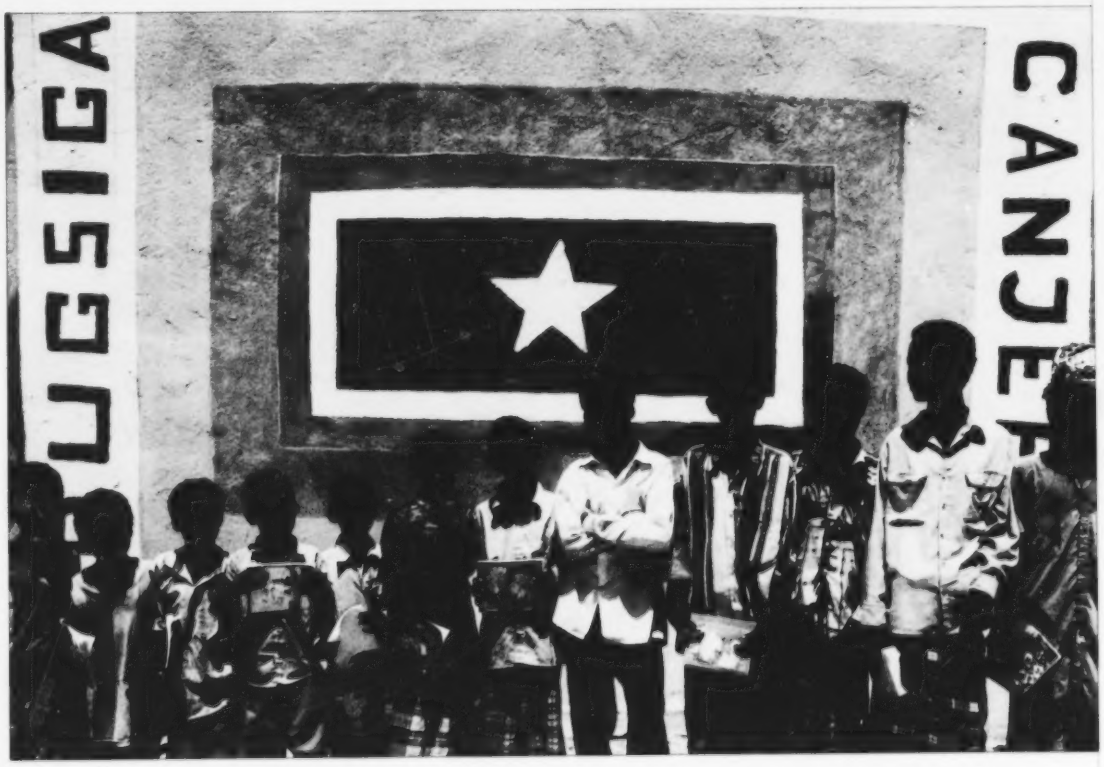
And yet, development experts say they have only scratched the surface of making it a responsibly managed operation.

"If we tried to enforce things, we'd be seen as 'bad' people," says Brian Drayner, UNCTAD's security officer. "The governor came along and said 'step back, you're upsetting too many people.' Until the SSDF is prepared to enforce the regulations, we're wasting our time."

Howard Clarke, UNCTAD's port specialist, tries to explain why Bossaso seems to keep foiling itself. "Our mandate is to get it to the point where the finances are transparent, but they're all cutting their own deals. Most of the people involved in the port are not there because of their qualifications, but their family ties. There's supposed to be a police force, but then another group comes in and says 'no, we're the police force.'"

But Bossaso is not a place of warlords and their daily gun battles, and for that reason most here say they will never return to Mogadishu. How to make it more livable remains a complicated question. You can't deal with Bossaso as a community, as you can in a place like Harago, says Omar, one of the many educated Mogadishans who resettled here. "You need to deal with formal structures and there are none." His words make me understand why so many Somalis doubt plans to begin re-establishing a central government at a national reconciliation meeting this fall.

We head for the airport, a one-room operation where someone collects an exit fee and stamps my passport in the name of a government that doesn't exist. But the people of Somalia do. And as I leave Bossaso, I drown out the reek by recalling the smell of Asha's oonsi, which will linger in my memory for a long, long time. ■



Male students pose in front of a new primary school near Bossaso, built by the community with UNDP funds. Girls also attend.

Ilene R. Prusher is a freelance journalist based in Jerusalem. She writes for numerous publications, including the Christian Science Monitor, Financial Times, *and the* Philadelphia Inquirer.

DANA WICKWARE/UNDP

ELA BHATT

WARRIOR FOR WOMEN A VOICE FOR THE POOR

By Kristin Helmore

Soft-spoken but iron-willed, the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association of India has spent a lifetime working to change the way governments regard those on the fringes of modern economies. Today she shares her views on the causes of poverty and what is needed to defeat it.

The small Indian grandmother in a starched silk sari is hardly a charismatic figure. Her iron-grey hair is pulled so tightly back from its austere central parting that I wince in sympathy. Her manner is gracious, yet withdrawn; her smile genuine but tentative. She insists politely that she remembers me from more than ten years ago, but I think it's unlikely. So many people have travelled to India to pay her homage, searching for clues to the mystery of effective human-scale development in the extraordinary organization she established. We must all blend together in her mind.

I first met Ela Bhatt in 1985 in Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat, northwestern India. I had been urged to visit her by Margaret Snyder, founding director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, who described Bhatt's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) as one of the best—if not *the* best—grassroots programmes for women on the planet.

I was sure that when I reached Ahmedabad I would find a living legend: a forceful, female Mahatma Gandhi. Instead, then as now, Ela Bhatt was modesty itself, exemplifying in her very character the self-effacement and devotion to work typical of the true Gandhian disciple.

Bhatt's connection with Gandhi is more than ideological. As a child, she watched her grandparents' involvement in the nonviolent independence movement that Gandhi inspired. In 1955, working as a lawyer, she applied Gandhian principles in representing Ahmedabad's beleaguered textile workers. Her mentor was Ansuyabehn Sarabhai, who, with Gandhi, had founded the Textile Labour Association, India's first union for textile workers, in 1917. Today, at age 63, Bhatt is still active as head of SEWA, still "struggling"—a word she is particularly fond of—to help poor women improve their lives.

I vividly remember our first meeting over a decade ago. It took place in Ela Bhatt's tiny office in the multi-storied SEWA building, surrounded by Ahmedabad's swirling traffic, noise, dust, heat, fumes and endless rivers of people. Inside, SEWA was also in motion—each floor a blur of faded cotton saris, thick black braids and dusty bare feet. In this entire bustling building, the SEWA Bank is the room in which Ela Bhatt takes most pride. Here, illiterate vegetable vendors, rag-pickers and other self-employed women make savings deposits, take out loans for business capital, and sit cross-legged on the floor in small groups, drinking tea. Here babies are nursed and rocked to sleep, and women meet for moments of friendship, laughter and mutual support, as women do at village wells all over rural India.

When Ela Bhatt spoke in 1985 of the organization she had founded 13 years before, she seemed to erase herself, insisting that my attention be drawn not

to her personal achievements, but rather to the object of her lifelong struggle and labour: the invisible masses of poor, undocumented workers.

We meet again in 1996 in the spare but spacious dining room of her daughter's apartment in New Haven, Connecticut, where, with an obvious twinge of shyness, she asks that I call her not Mrs. Bhatt or Dr. Bhatt (she holds a law degree from Gujarat University and a string of honorary doctorates), but simply "Ela."

But when we get down to the question at hand, poverty, her shyness evaporates. When she points out that 95 per cent of India's labourers are unrecognized for their contribution to the national economy, unsupported, routinely exploited and harassed in their work, the humble disciple of Gandhi suddenly becomes tough and unbending. The gentle grandmother steps aside.

"Personally, I don't think there can be any greater injustice to anybody in the world than to have one's work contribution negated," she declares, visibly outraged. "Just look at your major employment sectors in a developing country. They're mostly agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, fisheries, small-scale industries, petty vending, hawking, micro-enterprises. So who are the producers? Who is the work force? Who is the backbone of any economy in the country? It's the poor! Yet they are not recorded as workers in the national census. They are described as non-workers!"

This cruel irony—that the work of the "informal sector" is not factored in as part of the gross domestic product, that the majority of workers in the developing world are officially invisible—is the cause of more than injustice and exploitation. According to Ela Bhatt, this lack of recognition is a primary cause of poverty itself.

To be uncounted, she says, is to be unprotected and unsupported. It means earning less than the minimum wage, with no job security, no access to affordable credit, no possibility of owning the tools of one's trade, no means of saving for an emergency. It means doing without sick leave, maternity leave and child care. It means vulnerability to extortion and harassment by the police and institutionalized exploitation by one's employers and creditors, who are often one and the same. (Employers who lend workers money and withhold wages to ensure payment carry on a tradition of bonded labour, now technically illegal in India.) It means working 16 hours a day or more and earning just enough to feed one's family for that day, and sinking deeper into debt in the process. According to Bhatt, life in the informal sector is more like slavery than employment.

Here, illiterate vegetable vendors, rag-pickers and other self-employed women make savings deposits, take out loans for business capital, and sit cross-legged on the floor drinking tea.

"The poor are all very active economically, very productive," she continues with deceptive sweetness. "They contribute to the national economy, but in return they receive very little from the prosperity of the country." The majority, in other words, is marginalized.

When national policies and systems of employment and finance work to the dis-

JOSHUA SCHMITZ

SEWA today has over a quarter of a million members, like these market women in Bangalore.

advantage of the majority—the informal sector—the poor remain locked in poverty.

By now we have reached the point in the interview where the subject under discussion has completely taken over, where Ela Bhatt's shyness and hesitation have given way to passionate conviction, empathy and determination. As we sit in her daughter's large, well-worn dining room, it seems in a sense as if the impoverished millions of India have joined us there, grateful that at last they have someone who will speak on their behalf.

Ela Bhatt says that three things need to happen if this mass injustice is to be corrected and widespread poverty eradicated: first is public recognition of the economic contribution of the informal sector (she prefers the more upbeat term, "self-employed"). This will lead automatically to the second step: political visibility and influence. "When the poor organize themselves on the basis of work and make a statement to society that they are the major contributors to the economy, then they become visible. Then they are able to make themselves heard, to say, 'This is what we want,' and to come to a bargaining position."

"When the poor organize themselves and make a statement to society that they are major contributors to the economy, then they become visible."

JØRGEN SCHYTTE

For the 251,000 members of SEWA, political visibility has already resulted in the enforcement of minimum wage laws, protection from layoffs for piece-workers and freedom from police harassment. Visibility has even resulted in laws guaranteeing fair prices for home-produced goods.

Political visibility, says Ela Bhatt, will also produce the third prerequisite for eliminating poverty: a change in national priorities. Up to now, the poor and the self-employed have rarely been priorities in the national budget. Instead, she says, "more and more roads, more and more industrial plants are being built. I'm not against industrialization and modern development as such," she adds. "But in return there should be alternatives so that the majority can also be taken along in the stream of progress."

The policy changes that are needed, she says, would ensure that the self-employed majority has access to essentials such as affordable raw materials, market opportunities, credit, training and economic safety nets such as maternity leave, health care and child care. "These will help self-employed workers enhance their contribution and they'll be able to participate more effectively in the modern sector."

But SEWA's work focuses on more than changes at the policy level. "Our approach being the Gandhian approach, we not only strive for economic gains," says Bhatt. "We are interested in our members as human beings, not just as workers. Apart from economics, we are also concerned with health, housing and the development of the person. We see human beings at the centre."

In this spirit, she points out that steps out of poverty need to be taken by the very people who bear the brunt of poverty—no one else can do it for them. The working poor, she says, need to organize and "struggle," so that when they demand fair wages for piece workers, for example, and protection from harassment or extortion, they get results.

SEWA is not, strictly speaking, a non-governmental organization or development agency. It's literally a labour union for women at the bottom of Indian society—the people whose interests are least served by mainstream economic structures. Significantly, the first step to this organized approach to poverty alleviation was not, in fact, taken by Ela Bhatt herself, but by a handful of poor women workers.

In 1972, a small group of headloaders—the unofficial porters of the textile industry—approached the women's wing of the TLA, the textile workers' union. These illiterate women, who carry huge loads of fabric and bales of cotton , through the streets of Ahmedabad on their heads, wanted to know how they could receive some of the benefits their unionized sisters in the factories enjoyed. They were referred to Mrs. Bhatt, a lawyer representing the TLA, and the movement grew from there. SEWA (the acronym translates as "service") now has dues-paying members in six Indian states and more than 3,000 members in its newest "local" in Durban, South Africa.

In 1977, Ela Bhatt was awarded the prestigious Maysaysay Award, known as Asia's Nobel Prize. In 1986, the Government of India appointed her to chair a National Commission on Self-Employed Women. In this capacity, she prepared a milestone report, "Women's Labour Power," most of the recommendations of which have been incorporated into the government's eighth Five-Year Plan. These include the establishment, at the national level, of a credit fund for women, a social-security fund for women and a day-care fund. The report was translated into 18 Indian languages and German.

The SEWA Bank, with its many services, has 120,000 clients, about US$3 million in assets—all generated by SEWA members—and a loan-repayment rate of 96 per cent. Women who use the bank are not only freed from the exorbitant rates charged by money-lenders. The bank has even become a source of emotional support to its clients. One SEWA member put it this way, "Our bank is like my mother's house."

But when I ask a question about SEWA "beneficiaries," Ela Bhatt points out emphatically that what SEWA provides to its members is not charity. It is simply a set of services, training and financial systems that give self-employed workers the same benefits that others enjoy, enabling them to work more productively.

For women who literally had nothing before joining the union, such services not only change their lives in the pro-

DANA WICKWARE/UNDP

foundest sense, they save lives as well. In India, six out of every ten self-employed workers are women, and among these women the rates of pregnancy-related death are disproportionately high. Women whose work supports their families from day to day on the brink of starvation cannot afford to take time off after childbirth. Moreover, they are often severely weakened by repeated pregnancies, from which they have insufficient time to recover. SEWA's paid maternity leave programme, to which each member contributes 15 rupees (about 50 US cents) each time she becomes pregnant, offers women a stipend that enables them to stay home for about a week after each delivery. The programme also gives the mother a kilogram of protein-rich ghee (clarified butter) to help build up her strength and that of the baby. These are simply union benefits, specially tailored to meet the needs of the most productive members of India's work force: women.

"You cannot eradicate poverty without the participation of women," says Bhatt. "Among the poor, all women work." This is in contrast to men, she points out, who will accept a state of unemployment if wages or work are not to their liking. "Men wait for job offers, and they won't work for a pittance. But women always work."

Increasingly in India and throughout the world, more and more women bear sole responsibility for the survival and welfare of their children. In addition, income earned by women tends to be spent on the family to a far greater extent than income earned by men. "Whatever income goes into the hands of women, almost 98 per cent is spent for the family—for food, clothes, for the children's education, for shelter," Bhatt says. In the case of a typical man, studies in India show that only 50 to 60 per cent of his earnings go for the family, and the rest he spends on himself. If he has bad habits, alcohol consumption, for instance, or gambling, then 90 per cent will be wasted.

"I strongly think that we should let more and more income go into the hands of women, so that the quality of life of the family will go up faster."

The champion of self-employed women is not opposed to economic liberalization and the emphasis on free-market capitalism that have redirected India's economic policies in recent years. Indeed, liberalization, she says, should also be applied to the working conditions of the self-employed. "They are also burdened with too much bureaucracy." With a chuckle of contempt, she uses terms like "License-Raj" and "Inspector-Raj" to describe the labyrinthian empire of regulations and red tape that impedes the activities of workers such as street vendors.

But what concerns Ela Bhatt most about current economic trends is what she calls distorted progress. "It's not balanced progress. Those who already have are becoming richer, because there's more investment at the upper levels, more urgency in giving priority and in the allocation of funds and resources to the upper levels."

But suppose—just suppose—that the vast informal sector were made a national priority, what would happen then? With the unflagging, clear-eyed optimism of a true Gandhian, she sums up her vision of poverty eradication: "The majority of the people would be incorporated into the productivity of the country," she says simply. "The gap between the haves and have-nots would decrease. The whole economy would thrive." ■

Kristin Helmore, a freelance journalist based in the US, first reported on Ela Bhatt for an award-winning series on developing country women for the Christian Science Monitor.

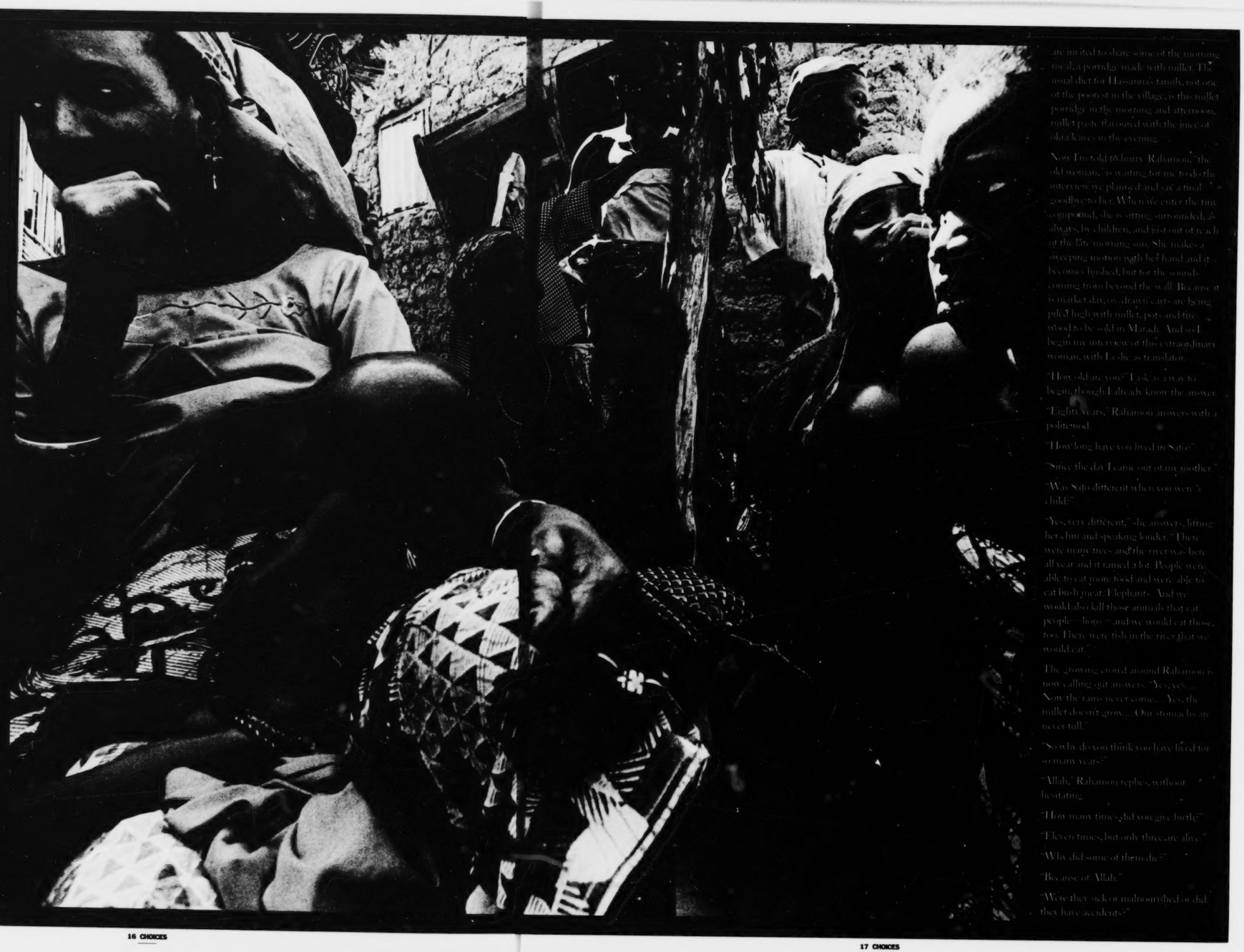
Earlier this year, CHOICES asked photojournalist Eugene Richards, on assignment in Niger, to explore the meaning of poverty in a country that ranks 173rd out of 175 of the world's nations in terms of human development. Here he captures the efforts of one woman to save the life of her great-grandson—an experience common to many in the developing world but beyond the comprehension of most in industrialized countries. The essay is the first in a series examining the most inhuman of human conditions, during the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, 1997–2006.

SAFO

Text and Photographs by Eugene Richards

This morning, the sky over Niger is clouded over and foreboding. The moon and the stars that would normally be visible this early, an astonishing net of diamonds, appear to have dropped to earth. "It's going to rain," my travelling companion, Leslie, says wistfully, when she feels the very first breath of wind; before then the air had been utterly still. In our car's headlights, we watch sticks and feathers and scraps of toilet tissue being blown down the streets. Halos of dust form above the tiny bumps of lantern light that mark where whole families are sleeping.

We drive cautiously leaving Maradi, a city of 65,000, dodging children who have crawled onto the road and the goats that wander everywhere, and are



out on the brushy flatlands where the air abruptly turns hotter, the sun brighter. Yesterday, when we were in Sato, the home of 5,500 Hausa, traditional healers performed to the beating of drums—a dance for rain around a sacred baobab tree. These women danced to exhaustion. Not here. It is again, the sun sickly white, steaming upward, draining what colour, moisture, and relief the night-time had lent this parched earth.

Barely five minutes later, after zooming across the dried-up river bed—two boys playing with oversize tires climb hill into the clay-walled village. Our documentation of health conditions is almost completed; this will be our last day in Sato before heading home. We are returning to say our goodbyes. We stop first at the compound of the village chief, that of Hassanna's house. Hassanna had been Leslie's mentor the years she worked here as a Peace Corps nurse; her family has been a great help to us on the trip.

The women in the compound are already at work, hunched over, pounding grain in rhythm with each other, tending the cook fires, stirring the morning meal and shelling peanuts, while the infants on their backs contentedly sleep. They see us and we are nearly overwhelmed by a chorus of greetings.

"*Ina kwana?*" How did you spend the night? Did you sleep in health? "*Lafiya kwana?*" a dozen people call out. Leslie, who had learned to speak Hausa, is drawn away into conversation.

"*Ina kwana?*" I'm asked again.

And I reply, "*Lafiya.*" "In health."

"*Lafiya?*" Are you in health? "*Lafiya.*" How is your work? More questions.

"*Lafiya, lafiya dai.*" I reply again, but more timidly. Men repairing the compound's walls are swarming to me. They want to talk to me about the work they are doing, about the long years of drought, about the photographs they see me taking. But I'm embarrassed that even now, after working in Sato for two weeks, I can't speak more than a few Hausa words.

Sensing how I'm feeling, Hassanna approaches me and for a brief moment holds both my hands. Then she touches her heart—"*Sannu*, I'm sorry to you, I think, that despite my shortcomings I'm still welcome here. Before we leave, we are invited to share some of the morning meal, a porridge made with millet. The usual diet for Hassanna's family, not one of the poorest in the village, is this millet porridge in the morning and afternoon, millet paste flavored with the juice of okra leaves in the evening.

"Now I'm told to hurry, Rahamon," the old woman, is waiting for me to do the interview we planned and say a final goodbye to her. When we enter the inner compound, she is sitting surrounded, as always, by children, and just out of reach of the late morning sun. She makes a sweeping motion with her hand and it becomes hushed, but for the sounds coming from beyond the wall. Because it is market day, ox-drawn carts are being piled high with millet, pots and fire-wood to be sold in Maradi. And so I begin my interview of the extraordinary woman, with Leslie as translator.

"How old are you?" Leslie asks, a way to begin, though I already know the answer.

"Eighty years," Rahamon answers with a polite nod.

"How long have you lived in Sato?"

"Since the day I came out of my mother."

"Was Sato different when you were a child?"

"Yes, very different," she answers, lifting her chin and speaking louder. "There were many trees and the river was here all year and it rained a lot. People were able to eat more food and were able to eat bush meat: Elephants. And we would also kill those animals that eat people—hyenas—and we would eat those, too. There were fish in the river that we would eat."

The growing crowd around Rahamon is now calling out answers: "Yes, yes! Now the rains never come! Yes, the millet doesn't grow! Our stomachs are never full."

"So why do you think you have lived for so many years?"

"Allah," Rahamon replies, without hesitating.

"How many times did you give birth?"

"Eleven times, but only three are alive."

"Why did some of them die?"

"Because of Allah."

"Were they sick or malnourished or did they have accidents?"

"Don't you remember the baby I had who was sick?" Rahamou asks. She stares at me. I want to tell her that I could never forget Bilia. "Well," she adds, "my children died like that."

The very first child the village midwives wanted to show us when we began our research two weeks ago was a severely malnourished ten-month-old. Her lymph nodes were swollen, her liver enlarged. The baby had been given a penicillin injection at the poorly equipped and understaffed local clinic. The *sorkon*, the spiritual healer, had made tiny leather amulets for the child to wear to make her eat. The second child that we were shown, moments later, was also malnourished and dehydrated. Named Bilia, he was being carried on the sinewy back of Rahamou, his great-grandmother. The boy's mother, Rahamou's granddaughter, had died two years earlier, and now the child was refusing food and water. When our offer to transport the boy to hospital was turned down, Leslie explained to Rahamou how to prepare an oral rehydration solution with water, salt and sugar. And after asking permission, I made a photograph, inches from her and the boy, who would cry out in pain as he slipped in and out of sleep.

Two days later, Leslie and I went to Rahamou's house to check on Bilia. Some men sitting in the shade outside informed us that the boy's condition had very suddenly worsened and the old woman had to carry him to the hospital in Maradi. She may have had to walk the 11 kilometres, they said. When we arrived at the hospital in Maradi, women who were waiting there with their babies told us that Bilia had died. We hurried back to Saito, but still couldn't find Rahamou. Villagers later told us that she would have stopped on the way back at the home of relatives, who would prepare the boy for burial.

I dreamt that night about my meeting with a man who had tuberculosis and about Rahamou. The man with tuberculosis was sitting alone in a three-sided hut, in a kind of isolation, coughing, emaciated, his shoulder blades as slim and shiny as bat wings. Around him, peering in, very afraid, were his relatives and neighbours. Rahamou, when I dreamt of her, was walking across the ashy, blistering hot landscape, never reaching her destination. The lifeless child was against her bare back.

Leslie and I awoke early, both having slept badly. At Rahamou's compound, a great crowd of villagers had gathered to express their sympathy.

"I heard the news about Bilia," Leslie said.

"*Ba shi*," Rahamou softly replied. "Ba shi," meaning he's no longer here, he's not anywhere.

"When did it happen?" Leslie asked.

"Yesterday, when the sun was straight overhead."

Listening, not wanting to take pictures or intrude, I stood in back of the crowd. But Rahamou suddenly motioned for me to come forward. Remembering that the photographs I had made earlier in the week were of her and the critically ill Bilia, she asked if I would please take a different picture of her. One that spoke of the future, perhaps a happier one. One with "a fat baby," she said.

Rahamou adjusted her head cloth and dress and lifted the chubbiest baby in the compound onto her lap. She looked straight at me. The infant cooed and giggled. I took the picture. ■

Eugene Richards, based in New York, was named 1996 Magazine Photographer of the Year by the National Press Photographers Association, capping off a long list of honors in a 20-year career. He is the author of nine books, including Americans We, *1995 winner of the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award for Best Photographic Book. Currently, he is a media fellow at the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.*

TEND TO THOSE WHO TEND TO THE FUTURE

Every nation holds the secret key to unlock the door on development: women. To be more precise: poor women.

Statistics suggest the magnitude of the issue. The number of rural women living in poverty in the developing world has increased by almost 50 per cent over the past 20 years, to more than 500 million.

The growing "feminization" of poverty comes partly as a result of war and civil conflicts, environmental degradation and rapid urbanization, all of which take a disproportionate toll on women.

Yet, with education and economic opportunities, women can advance from a situation where they are triply disadvantaged —being poor, being female and perhaps, too, being single parents—to one where their work has a triple multiplier effect, in the home, in society at large, and in the development of the next generation.

A growing amount of solid evidence suggests that a woman's income and her degree of control over household spending have a direct impact on her children's nutrition and health. In Brazil, for instance, the chances of a child's survival increase by about 20 per cent when income is in the hands of the mother rather than the father.

Since women play a critical role in both the rural economy and household food production, raising their productivity in agriculture contributes to better family nutrition and increased income. Studies show that given the same access to land, education and technology, females can equal or outproduce men.

Investing in girls' and women's education is now widely recognized as yielding the largest return on the development dollar, leading to reduced fertility and increased participation in development and democracy-building efforts and economic productivity.

Women's educational advancement also helps future generations. In Colombia and Thailand, among other developing countries, children of educated mothers perform better on pre-school tests. Studies also show that educated mothers are more likely to send their children to school.

It is often women themselves who are challenging the structural roots of inequality while alleviating the symptoms of poverty that inequality creates. The Self-Employed Women's Association of India, for instance, has helped organize street vendors and others and provided them with training, credit and savings facilities, and health services. The institution has also been a force behind policy and legal changes that support poor women who are self-employed (see page 10).

The Centre for Women's Health and Education (MUSA) in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais began by providing low-income women in urban areas with social services and training in civic education. Today, in response to women's desire to be economically independent, MUSA is organizing classes in clothing production—from sewing to financial management and marketing.

And in South Africa, during the process of redrafting the constitution, a National Women's Coalition was formed. Members drafted a Women's Charter for Effective Equality that became a powerful tool for ensuring that the new constitution incorporated gender concerns. Today, the national budget in South Africa is reviewed by a parliamentary committee that examines the potential of each budget item to contribute to gender equality goals.

But in too many parts of the world, opportunities are being lost because social conventions relegate women and girls to second- or third-class citizens. Attitudes can limit women's aspirations and stunt their capacity for growth and change. The result: a vast reserve of unrealized development potential.

First and foremost, laws and social mores often prevent women from owning land. In sub-Saharan Africa, where women have prime responsibility for food production, they are generally limited to user rights to land, and then only with the consent of a male relative.

Women also receive a disproportionately small share of credit from banking institutions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, women constitute only seven to 11 per cent of the beneficiaries of credit programmes.

Lack of education continues to obstruct the sweeping changes that are needed. Two out of three illiterate people in the world today are women.

Far too many women around the globe still lack access to family planning and reproductive health services, another obstacle to development and the realization of opportunities.

But perhaps the most disturbing threat to women's advancement is violence. According to the *Human Development Report 1997*, it is estimated that one in three married women in developing countries are battered by their husbands during their lifetime. Rape, dowry deaths, bride burnings and other forms of domestic and sexual violence occur at an all too frequent rate.

As long as these barriers exist, progress across the board will be stifled. Efforts to achieve sustainable human development will only succeed if our resources empower women as well as men to seize opportunities and make a difference for themselves, their families and their communities.

The bottom line? Women and children are the future.

James Gustave Speth is Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme.

JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH

COMMENTARY

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

WHAT WOMEN WANT

Tools, information, and a little bit of cash are what African women say they need to change their world. Journalists on a recent visit to the Republic of Guinea and Senegal—part of a UNDP-sponsored "travelling seminar"—saw for themselves how much women can accomplish when given the chance. Following are excerpts from the journalists' essays, written exclusively for CHOICES.

JILL NELSON,
freelance journalist based in New York, who writes for the *Village Voice*, the *Nation*, and *USA Today*

In the end, it is the will and hard work of the women of Senegal and Guinea that pervade and shape my visit, and remain in my consciousness long after I have returned home. I am haunted too by the contrasts I saw during our 11-day trip: the hospitality and elegance of rural women in Senegal whose village has no water and who live a small step from poverty; the outspoken feminist politics of Guinea's Minister of Women, just returned from the traditional *hajj* to Mecca; the generosity of poor women in villages who press upon me small gifts and ask many questions when they find out that I am an African-American.

The strength of African women comes through most strongly. It is demonstrated in Kayar, a fishing village in Senegal, by women who have built a thriving business selling dried, salted and smoked fish, using the most basic of tools. Standing on the beach, a woman the same age as I am describes a typical workday: waiting into the night for the boats to return; cleaning and processing fish in darkness, illuminated only by an occasional oil lamp; going home to sleep for a few hours and then rising to tend to children, husband, and start work all over again. This strength is seen too in the women of Popenguine, who have methodically planted mangrove shoots in marshland and are encouraging them to grow, working to restore their environment, and who laugh heartily when they tell the story of a woman who ignored explanation and warning and continued to cut firewood from a protected area and finally was arrested. I remember the pride and confidence of the women farmers of Balandougou, Guinea, who led me through rows of tomatoes, eggplants and yams, showing me the water pump at the river used to irrigate them. They dream of how much more food could be grown with additional pumps.

I am stunned by the relative simplicity of what these women use and need to transform their lives: some lamps, a few ovens, planting tools, a mill, truly small amounts of cash.

Women, if asked what they want and need, can and will tell you. It is up to the listener to hear and respond. Provided the tools, minimal capital and expertise needed to begin the process of becoming self-sufficient, women do great things: produce food, send their children to school, establish credit where credit for women is unheard of, build businesses, reforest the landscape, learn to read and write. They also become politically active, independent, and take leadership.

As the women of Africa go—and this is true for most of the world—so goes their society. A truck, so the potters of Baté-Nafadji can take their wares to market, a few water pumps for Balandougou, lamps for the women of Kayar—a small price to pay for the seeds of transformation.

RACHID N'DIAYE,
***Africa International*, Paris**

What is development? During a trip to Senegal last April, that was the question I continued to ask myself.

Watching women at work under the harsh African sun, it occurred to me that development, like religion, is in the first place a question of faith: a belief that one can, even under the most trying of circumstances, break free from the shackles of poverty. Development in this sense has little to do with official declarations or the theories of experts. Rather, it is about strength of will, in this case of the women

As the women of Africa go, so goes their society.

of Kayar, who, despite their lack of education, were recognized by the President of the Republic for making their small fishing village into an economic magnet for nearby communities. Thus Kayar, the "village of fish" was born, and the princesses of the sea—the women of Kayar—are taking an active part in trading the ocean's wealth. It is through this trade that the village's people are fed and its children sent to school. The fish, including cod, tuna, *ketiakh* and *tambadian*—as well as fruits, syrups and other products—are now attracting buyers from all over the region.

It is a lesson in humility for foreign visitors to see the struggles of these women, who now say they are proud to no longer be drying fish on the ground, as they once did, and instead use smoking ovens. In spite of their labours, they still find time to greet us with the beating of drums and speeches improvised amid bursts of laughter. They carry on their fingers, blackened by smoke, the long nights of work.

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

Fish market in Kayar, Senegal.

In Popenguine, we meet Oulimata Thiaw, a 45-year-old mother of eight, self-taught, who has become one of the first women leaders of a rural community in Senegal. Under her direction, and with assistance from UNDP, more than 1,000 women are protecting a nature reserve located a stone's throw from hyenas and jackals that the women are constantly driving off. Thiaw's work in raising this hostile land out of poverty is now attracting tourists from all over the world: she and the other women have recreated a mangrove swamp to preserve the indigenous fauna and flora of the region and are breeding crabs to support themselves and their families.

Residents are dreaming not of bringing the moon to earth, but of pumps, latrines and generators.

But in most of Senegal, this expanse of dry, red earth, the most basic problem is water, which is expensive. In Fandane-Wolof, another village not far away, residents are dreaming not of bringing the moon down to earth, but of pumps, latrines and generators.

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

Farmers in Balandougou, Guinea.

MICHÈLE AULAGNON,
***Le Monde*, Paris**

Since she has been earning a little money by selling her pottery, Mali Doumbouya has only one ambition—to learn to read and count so she won't be "ripped off anymore by middlemen." Barefoot on the beaten earth in the village of Baté-Nafadji, in Guinea, this 47-year-old woman with a contagious smile looks for words to express herself. How is she to describe the behaviour of truck drivers who offer to take her earthenware pots to Kankan to sell them? No words are strong enough. "Thieves—two-faced people who earn more money than we women who work so hard."

Mali is beside herself.

And yet this small woman, who runs rather than walks, feels she has done pretty well for herself. Today she is supporting her entire family from the income earned by selling what she makes with her own hands. She works hard and bears the marks of the last firing of her pots—a burn on her right arm. But thanks to her, her family is living better. Her youngest son, seven years old, even has a chance of going to school. "But he is still too small to help me with the accounts," she says regretfully. Schooling was not an opportunity available to her older children, especially not to her three girls.

Women and Africa have something in common: they both inspire compassion, or, at least, a concern for their future. All over the world, women are the first victims of violence. Out of an estimated 13.5 million refugees in the world today, three-quarters are women and children. Even in the field of education, glaring inequalities still exist: two-thirds of the world's illiterates are women.

Africa is the only continent in the world where poverty is expected to become more acute as we move into the next century. In the mid-1980s, Africa had 16 per cent of the world's poor. By the year 2000, it will have 32 per cent. By that time, the number of people living in poverty is expected to jump to over 300 million, or roughly 50 per cent of the region's population.

After being confronted with these statistics, after reading the experts' reports, each more alarming than the preceding one, I marvel at the optimism of Mali Doumbouya. For here is a woman, who, with a small loan and support from her fellow potters, has pulled herself up from absolute poverty. One wonders, is she the only one?

No, there are Confort and Aminata, Liberian refugees in the same village, who want to learn a trade and go back to their country where, they are sure, peace is soon to come. There is Fatou Diop in the village of Fandane-Wolof in Senegal, who refuses to lend to men "because it is the women who repay their debts." And there is Oulimata Thiaw, one of two women heading up rural communities in Senegal, who are today playing the role of West Africa's "Amazons" in combating desertification. There is also Fatoumata Béréte, secretary-general of health workers in Guinea, whose ideas rival those of the most activist of American feminists.

There are many of them—African women battling poverty—and they are starting to get noticed. Governments, international donors and non-governmental organizations are all recognizing women's potential and offering help.

Mali Doumbouya has only one ambition—to learn to read and count so she won't be "ripped off anymore by middlemen."

SIOBHAN WILDE,
***Earth Times*, New York**

Sometimes it is the small changes that make the biggest difference.

"If there is a mill to grind grain, a woman has more time to look after her children, or her health," said Tounkara Kadé Diallo, who works with an organization in Conakry that examines ways appropriate technology can change women's lives. Pounding millet into flour by hand can take three hours, compared to less than a minute when done with a mill. And the consequences of this newly gained time can spread like an ink spot on a handkerchief, reaching into all parts of that woman's day or even her life.

During a visit to the village of Baté-Nafadji, I saw an adult literacy programme in action that gave women a chance to get ahead. It was part of a UNDP programme to support local initiatives in rural areas. The school, built by members of the community, is maintained with funds earned at a store attached to the classrooms. The wooden desks were made by local carpenters. The women—all between the ages of 28 and 53—are now more likely to send their children to school. And their children will be more likely to send their children to school. An educated woman becomes a stepping stone for the next generation.

Small changes can transform lives, and this is true for many aspects of development. Microcredit—lending small amounts of money that would mean little to someone in the industrialized world—is being embraced by many aid agencies as the ideal way to help people in a community act on their own initiative. Helping people to expand their income, through training for example, is another way to catalyze change. And this training doesn't have to come from outside experts. At Baté-Nafadji's pottery project, Liberian refugees were learning from Guinean women how to make clay pots and sculptures.

The people we visited can develop their communities and are willing to do so if given the opportunity, and, if necessary, the technical training. As we saw for ourselves, dialogue, cooperation, small amounts of money, and a sustainable means of earning an income are the keys.

SYLVANA NZIRORERA,
Public Affairs Officer,
UNDP, New York

African women awaken very early, before everyone else, to prepare food for the family and do household chores before going to the fields or carrying out other tasks that bring in money. In the evening, women are the last to sleep. This might be justified if the division of labour between men and women were equal, or if account were taken of women in special circumstances. But it is a well-known fact that women in Africa generate more than 70 per cent of household incomes, in addition to their role as primary caretaker for children.

Knowing the demands made on African women, I became curious about the situation of Djenabou, 21, who lives in a shantytown in Conakry, Guinea, with her husband and eight-month-old son. One of Djenabou's legs has been deformed since birth, and she walks leaning heavily to one side. While she is mobile, she needs help with the most routine of tasks.

When she was five months pregnant, Djenabou had to remain lying down or risk losing the baby. It was her husband, Tcherno, who managed the house. "With the baby it's the same thing," said Tcherno. "She can't carry it; I have to look after it.

Small changes can transform lives.

"I married Djenabou under pressure from my family," he added. "I would have preferred to find a woman who would do the cooking and the laundry, and could find a paid job in town to help me meet the needs of the family."

Instead, the couple depends on the generosity of others. Relatives pay for their small flat, and to eat they rely on African solidarity. But that can go only so far: the baby has been coughing for several days, but the family has no money for medicine. Tcherno, physically strong but with few qualifications, is desperately seeking a job. But he has had no luck. Nor does he have any land to cultivate, since he was born in the city, or the possibility of a loan, since he has no collateral.

But it is Djenabou who is most determined to rise above her circumstances. "After all, I said to myself, I may be physically disabled, but my brain is in working order," she told me one afternoon. "I may not be able to get a paid job, but I can learn a trade," she said.

Through a training course funded by UNDP and the International Labour Organisation, Djenabou—and 200 other disabled adults—have been able to

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

Potters in Baté-Nafadji, Guinea.

learn new skills. In Djenabou's case, it was needlework.

"I am absolutely set on getting something going, because the survival of my family depends on it," said Djenabou. "I have a child and my husband is threatening to leave us. But there is no way I am going to beg in the streets."

Djenabou's idea is to launch a small needlework business, and she is on her way to making that happen. With help from Guinea's Office for Private Investor Promotion—part of a larger effort supported by UNDP—she drew up a proposal for the new enterprise and is seeking a loan to finance it. The day I met her, her loan had been approved.

Djenabou refused to believe that a disabled person must always live off other people's goodwill. But she also didn't have much of a choice: as an African woman living in extreme poverty, Djenabou could either accept her despair, which sometimes leads to slow suicide, or take a leap into the unknown. She chose the latter.

Learning new skills in Conakry, Guinea.

EVAN SCHNEIDER/UNDP

JEAN-PAUL RUSTAN, *Le Figaro*, Paris

With thousands of fish drying in the sun, the beach at Kayar is a silvery grey. The heat retains a pungent odour, even in the homes nearby. Every year, fishermen bring in 40,000 tonnes of fish aboard their big motor-driven canoes. The moment the boats come in, the women salt and smoke the fish. It was these women, who, in 1993, formed the "Mantoulaye Guène" group, using loans from the Senegalese government and international donors, including UNDP and the UN Development Fund for Women. In less than four years, the group had bought ten smoking and braising ovens and 60 salting tanks, and had built three storage warehouses.

As a result, the time it takes to smoke the fish has been reduced from eight hours to two. Fish can now be stored for not just one month but five. The spin-offs are many: rising incomes, more time to care for the children, less risk of burning the fish during smoking and more hygienic handling of the catch, reducing disease. International aid in Kayar is working not as a palliative, but to support people's own creativity.

"We give a push, but for the activity to succeed, the people have to take responsibility for the projects," explains Odile Sorgho-Moulinier, UNDP resident representative in Senegal.

Further south, in Fandane-Wolof, the sun is so hot it burns the vegetation and water is scarce. Here again, women have organized themselves. And with the support of the government and UNDP, they have launched a series of small projects that are simultaneously improving living and working conditions. The traditional solidarity of the villagers, numbering about 1,000, made it possible to drill two wells and obtain a mill for grinding grain.

The mill replaces the mortar and pestle. One of the women's most back-breaking tasks has been done away with, and through a small charge to users, the mill is self-financing. Construction of at least ten latrines is revolutionizing sanitation in the village, and having a ready supply of water means that small market gardens may be possible. All of this was achieved by an investment of about US$60 per villager.

Grassroots development—focusing on discrete, concrete goals—has been gaining ground in the past few years over more ambitious, large-scale projects. For these home-grown efforts, adapted to local realities, have a better chance of being effective and sustainable over the long term. The ambitious objective that UNDP has set for itself on the eve of the 21st century—overcoming poverty—may well depend on initiatives of this kind.

International aid is working to support people's own creativity.

WAGDI OTHMAN, British Broadcasting Corporation, Abidjan

The women of Fandane-Wolof are not the kind to fold their arms and bemoan their fate. In 1987, 48 of them established a women's group that eventually was to benefit from a project co-financed by the Senegalese government, UNDP, the UN Capital Development Fund and the populations concerned. The women were given responsibility for managing a new water supply system. Through monthly contributions, they covered the operating and maintenance costs of a new pump and generator. This is not the first success to be credited to the Fandane-Wolof women's group. A few years earlier, the women of the village had received a millet grinder to ease their household work. Ten years later, the grinder is still operating, and through the income earned from public use of the grinder, the women of Fandane-Wolof have accumulated savings. They have saved enough to replace the millet grinder the day it stops working. ■

NOTEBOOK

GUNS, OR BETTER?

Even for someone who has made the study of poverty his business, Mahbub ul Haq was shocked by what he discovered about his native subcontinent. With one quarter of the world's people, South Asia—comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—is home to more poor people than any other region. More surprising is the fact that South Asia has also sunk to become the most illiterate, most malnourished and least gender-sensitive area of the world.

"Working on human development in South Asia was a rude awakening," says Haq, whose findings appear in the *Report on Human Development in South Asia 1997*, published last April.

South Asia's average per capita income at US$309 a year is nearly half that of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and much less than the $825 of East Asia (including China). The adult literacy rate at 48 per cent is lower than that of sub-Saharan Africa and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand (94 per cent). Two-thirds of the children in South Asia are malnourished compared to one-third in Africa.

Moreover, discrimination against girls in South Asia begins before they are born. Abortion of female foetuses, female infanticide and the neglect of young girls means that there are fewer women per 100 men than in any other region. When comparing the sex ratio of South Asia to global averages, demographers found that 74 million South Asian women are "missing": they have not been allowed to be born because they were female, or died at a young age.

"The missing women of South Asia are a telling indictment of the neglect of basic rights of women in this region," states the report.

"We in South Asia are quite articulate people, and rather good at hiding our poverty," says Haq, in his characteristically candid style. "We have deluded ourselves for too long."

Mahbub ul Haq was the chief architect of the UNDP-commissioned *Human Development Report*, an independent study published annually since 1990. As special adviser to the UNDP Administrator and principal author of the report, Haq had the formidable task of dissecting the causes of global poverty and underdevelopment, and coming up with a blueprint for policymakers and planners to improve human well-being across the board. But in spite of the heady role, which earned him the title of "Mr. Human Development," Haq felt that the most meaningful work was elsewhere.

"The real challenge lay back home, in South Asia and in my own country," Haq says. In 1995 he returned to Islamabad, Pakistan to fulfill a long-time dream: the establishment of a policy research institute called the Human Development Centre, focusing on South Asia.

At UNDP, Haq's pet project had always been the desire to reap a "peace dividend" from post-Cold War demilitarization. Now that he is back in Asia, the idea has turned into an obsession. The reason is not hard to find: While military spending as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) has declined in every region of the world since 1985, in South Asia it has increased by 12 per cent. The region spent $14 billion on defence in 1994, and the figure is rising every year. India, in fact, is one of the world's biggest importers of conventional arms.

Haq's *Report on Human Development in South Asia* makes some sobering comparisons: With the $1 billion that Pakistan spent on buying three French submarines, the country could have provided the following services to its citizens for a year: primary education to all 17 million school-aged children not in school, access to safe drinking water for 67 million people and family planning services for nine million couples. Similarly, $4.5 billion spent on a defence upgrade package in India could have provided basic education to 45 million illiterate children, safe drinking water to 226 million people and basic medicines to 135 million people for a year.

JØRGEN SCHYTTE

The South Asia report lays out a list of priority concerns that political leaders and policymakers need to focus on over the next 15 years. Targeted areas include universal primary education, basic health care and safe drinking water for all, enough food for undernourished children, family-planning services for at least 80 per cent of couples who want them and credit for the most vulnerable groups.

The price tag for all this? According to Haq, $130 billion over the next 15 years, which he says South Asian countries can finance with their own resources by setting aside a mere 1.6 per cent of their GDP. Much of the money could be raised through a regional compact that would reduce defence spending and could free up as much as $125 billion over the next 15 years, he adds.

If that is to happen, Haq says, national leaders must prepare the ground for a new vision and direction for South Asia. "If we succeed in shaking up the complacency of policymakers in the region," he says, "it would change the destiny of over one billion people in South Asia.... There would be nothing more emotionally satisfying or intellectually challenging than to redeem that pledge."

The *Report on Human Development in South Asia 1997* is available in English, Hindi and Urdu through Oxford University Press, and in Bengali through University Press Limited in Dhaka, Bangladesh. For more information, contact the Human Development Centre, 8, Bazar Road, G-6/4, Islamabad, Pakistan; tel: (92-51) 820499; fax: (92-51) 271256; e-mail: kh@hdc.sdnpk.undp.org ■

—Kunda Dixit

▸ **Prospects could be brighter for this Nepali family and others in South Asia.**

MICROCREDIT—TIMES TEN

By most accounts, microcredit is an unrivaled success when it comes to helping people out of poverty. But the demand for small loans in the developing world far outstrips supply—much like having a teaspoon to shovel sand on the beach. UNDP's goal is to take microlending to scale. A two-year pilot programme called MicroStart is exploring just that.

"There is an enormous amount of capital available for microfinance organizations, but there isn't the capacity to use it," says Henry Jackelen, manager of private sector development at UNDP and creator of MicroStart. "Building this capacity is the thrust of MicroStart."

In the two decades since the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh started the world's first microlending operations, more than 5,000 organizations have provided loans to ten million people worldwide. The movement went mainstream last February with the Microcredit Summit in Washington, DC, which set as a goal reaching 100 million of the world's poorest with microcredit by 2005.

Jackelen says the goal will be impossible to reach with existing organizations. "Someone has to think about helping new lending organizations get started," he says. "It's a little like building a house. You can learn it on your own once you have good guidance."

The US$42 million MicroStart programme—a distillation of the lessons learned by hundreds of microcredit organizations around the world—will operate in 25 of UNDP's 132 country offices. Each office will sponsor five to ten microcredit programmes, some new and others expanding. UNDP will not only provide money to capitalize loans, hire staff and cover operational costs, but it has contracted 36 international organizations with microcredit experience to provide technical guidance.

GEORGE ORICK

Indonesian entrepreneur.

UNDP has also hired two microfinance pioneers from Bangladesh and Bolivia to serve as regional advisers.

Sam Daley-Harris, the Microcredit Summit campaign director, says that the UNDP initiative fills an important niche. Most official aid institutions, especially the largest ones, can't deal with fledgling programmes in the $50,000 to $150,000 range, which is what a start-up effort might need, he says. MicroStart can.

Aside from tracking the usual financial indicators, MicroStart will chart institutional development as well. By watching how lending organizations form and operate, it will be possible to collect empirical data for the microcredit community at large. Although it's not a science, it will be possible to determine how best to expand organizations and help new programmes get started, Jackelen says.

MicroStart will also test the limits in types of organizations most capable of offering microcredit. The classic model is a non-governmental organization or state-run institution, but other groups may also have the necessary outreach, legitimacy in the community and corporate culture that allows for serious management.

"I had a call last year from an American doctor who worked in what used to be Zaire, asking whether his hospital could be a MicroStart lender," Jackelen says. It was a good question, and one that MicroStart will attempt to answer. "We really haven't gotten private banks into it, or other types of organizations, such as church groups and women's service organizations," he says. "But MicroStart is meant to take risks."

Since the February summit, the microcredit movement has grown wings, Daley-Harris says. A UN representative from Bangladesh formed Friends of Microcredit, which will use UN channels to disseminate information, and in June, Bankers' Trust launched a Microcredit Development Fund, which invites high net-worth clients to give a minimum of $50,000 at low interest rates to microcredit organizations around the world. Also in June, the chairman of Monsanto Co. hosted a conference on microcredit for corporations.

"At risk is failure, meaning microfinance institutions going under because they aren't efficient and aren't effective," says Daley-Harris. "But with MicroStart, and with progress on these other fronts, I see the goal of reaching 100 million as realistic. It's not just going to happen on its own."

For more information about MicroStart, contact Henry Jackelen, Manager, Private Sector Development Programme, UNDP, 336 East 45th Street, 8th floor, New York, NY 10017; fax: (212) 906-3655. ■

—Catherine Toups

FUELING THE FUTURE

Bob Dylan was right. The answer indeed seems to be blowing in the wind—not to mention shining in the sun.

Renewable sources of energy—long derided as the irrelevant obsession of back-to-the-land environmentalists—could both fight global warming and alleviate world poverty.

That is the conclusion of a UNDP report, released last April, which produces evidence that the wind and the sun, falling water and other renewable sources could supply half the world's energy needs by the year 2050. In the process, they could bring the blessings of electricity to the two out of five people in the developing world who now live beyond its reach.

Burning coal, oil and gas—the fossil fuels—produces carbon dioxide, the main cause of global warming, and emits pollution that chokes cities throughout the world, and spreads over the countryside. And relying on wood, dung and crop residues for cooking fuel—as two billion people are still forced to do—both damages the health of those who breathe in the smoke and denudes the land of cover and fertility.

JØRGEN SCHYTTE

Harnessing energy from the sun.

The report, *Energy After Rio: Prospects and Challenges*, says that windpower could easily produce far more electricity worldwide than we use from all sources at present. Meanwhile, the cost of electricity from solar cells today has dropped to about one-tenth of what it was 20 years ago.

Developing countries are in a good position to benefit from renewable resources. They often have a lot of sun, and a good deal of wind. These are distributed free by nature, even in the most remote places, and do not require costly grids and engineering to transform them into power. Those communities that are already connected to the grid could make money by selling the electricity they generate from natural sources.

One-third of the windpower harnessed in 1995 was in Asia, mostly in India. And there are some 22 manufacturers and distributors of solar water heaters in Southern Africa alone.

Developing countries could exploit these new technologies more rapidly than industrialized countries because their use of energy is growing much faster. Given a chance, the report says, developing countries could "leapfrog" over the old, dirty ways of producing energy to these cleaner ones, and achieve both technological and market leadership.

Using energy more efficiently is another solution outlined in the report. Energy-conserving improvements to existing installations could cut energy consumption by up to one-half; in new installations it could be slashed by up to 90 per cent.

In fact, studies show that cutting waste and boosting efficiency could help meet all the world's energy needs and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by two-thirds. Another study demonstrates that developing countries could raise their peoples' standard of living to the level enjoyed by Western Europeans in the mid-1970s and still only use 20 per cent more energy than they do today.

Developing countries have tremendous potential to develop renewable sources of energy, partly because they are building many new power plants, and partly because they have not done much about energy efficiency so far. China is still a rare and welcome exception. It has already committed about seven to eight per cent of all energy spending for efficiency improvements, with dramatic results.

For a copy of *Energy After Rio: Prospects and Challenges*, contact Liliana Aberger, Energy and Atmosphere Programme, UNDP, 305 East 45th Street, 9th floor, New York, NY 10017; fax: (212) 906-5148; e-mail: liliana.aberger@undp.org ■

—Geoffrey Lean

ANOTHER SIDE OF POVERTY

Bangkok—For five days in May, Justina Hierta, O'tisha Preston and Malika Spruiell—three American high schools students—braved Thailand's sweltering heat, snarling traffic and 95 per cent humidity to see how people in that country are helping themselves. The teens won the trip by writing the top project proposals in a contest sponsored by UNDP and the UN Association of the USA. Contestants were asked to draw up a plan for combating poverty in their own communities.

The schedule in Thailand was intense and gruelling. But what remains etched in their minds, the students say, is the warmth and hospitality of the Thai people.

"The people welcomed us into their lives," says Justina, describing her visit to Non Gard village, four hours outside Bangkok. Indeed they did. Thang Wudsanthia, 59, the village chief, "adopted" the three students and gave each of them a homespun cotton work shirt. "You are now part of our village," he declared, as the guests were served cups of hot tea and curry puffs.

Wudsanthia is proud of his community's achievements. For a long time, residents had depended on rainfed agriculture to make a living and suffered when crops failed. But two years ago, with a grant from UNDP and support from national agricultural experts, they began rearing chickens and livestock to supplement their uncertain farm incomes. Today, villagers boast 2,500 chickens, 250 cows, 58 ducks, 30 pigs and 28 bulls. They sell milk to neighbouring towns and have set up a revolving fund to buy vaccines for the animals. Some of them have even renovated their homes. Wudsanthia invited the students to take a look. The young Americans had never entered a house on stilts. They hesitantly walked up the shaky wooden stairs to one large room with a designated living area and space for cooking and sleeping.

Each day in Thailand brought a new experience—from the taste of spicy Thai food and pungent durian fruit to the taxi boat rides along Bangkok's meandering canals.

In Nakhon Ratchasima Province, the young winners met another group who had recently set up small cottage industries to earn extra income. With $12,000 from UNDP, residents in the community of Lung Wat Samakee are making *dong mai chan*, or paper funeral flowers, in their homes while tending to their children and daily chores.

Back in Bangkok, they were introduced to students at the Sathrivithaya secondary girls' school and discovered that the kids in Thailand were, in many ways, just like them.

Sopaporn Saeung, 17, was wearing a pair of sneakers with her school uniform, a white blouse and blue skirt. Her Jansport backpack slung over one shoulder, she briefed her new-found friends on the school's activities. "We are involved in a Friend for Friend Group in Bangkok," she said. "We work to prevent drug addiction in schools."

"What amazed me was that people in Thailand had problems similar to our own," says Malika. "Although now I don't feel that ours are that bad."

Certainly not as bad, she says, as those living in Klong Toey. Here, more than 100,000 men, women and children are crowded together in makeshift tin and wood shacks with no running water, drainage, primary health care or garbage collection. Through another UNDP-supported project, some of the slum's residents are working in a rice cooperative that buys large stocks of grain from nearby mills and sells it at low prices to members. The cooperative has about 500 members, including youths who help balance the organization's books. "The work keeps them occupied and they learn new skills," says Monwarin Boontang, a volunteer with the Duang Prateep Foundation, one of 22 community-based organizations in Klong Toey working to promote self-help. The goal is for every individual to make a contribution.

Inspired by what they saw in Thailand, the three students have started their own anti-poverty campaigns in their respective communities in the United States.

Keeping youths off the street is one of O'tisha's goals, while Justina believes that young people can be strong advocates against poverty. Malika will recruit friends for a cutlery drive for the Salvation Army's soup kitchen. "Once we finish collecting cutlery, we may start a clothing drive for the homeless," she says. "I know we can make a difference." ■

—I. Rajeswary

O'tisha Preston, 16, junior at Lakeland High School, Florida:
Providing tutoring and cooperative learning for children of poor, single-parent homes is O'tisha's way of keeping youths in her community off the streets at night. "I understand that in order to achieve, a child must set short-term goals," says O'tisha. "I know what it took to raise me." She obtained a room in a community centre in Lakeland where students can do their homework. Local churches and the community have donated books.

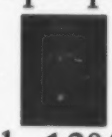
Justina Hierta, 15, sophomore at Community High School, Ann Arbor, Michigan:
Wants to organize youths and youth leaders in four high schools in Ann Arbor to participate in public service projects. According to Justina, there is a high level of drug and alcohol abuse among young people in the community. "I believe that youths have the possibility of preventing poverty in our future," she says. She has already met with youth leaders and is now identifying community service projects.

Malika Spruiell, 15, freshman at John Dewey High School, Brooklyn, New York:
Distressed by homelessness in her community, Malika walked over to the Salvation Army's soup kitchen in the Fort Greene neighbourhood and offered to help. Food was not the problem, the staff there said. More serious was a shortage of cutlery. Malika will collect forks, knives and spoons for the community kitchen, which feeds 350 people a day.

PHOTOS: JOHN EVERINGHAM/BLACK STAR

MATTERS OF FACT

Information is drawn from the 1995 and the 1997 *Human Development Reports*, commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme. The reports are published in English by Oxford University Press and in other language editions by a variety of publishers.

Women's Lives. On average, women in the least developed countries live **27 years** less than women in the industrialized world. Women in France and Japan live 83 years on average; the **life expectancy** of a woman in Sierra Leone is 35 years. The average age at **marriage** for a woman in Mali or Niger is 16; in Japan, New Zealand and Singapore, it's 27. • In Senegal, women spend about 17.5 hours a week collecting water. In Peru, women spend about 2.5 hours a day gathering **wood for fuel.** In nearly every country, women work more hours than men—when paid and unpaid **labour** is taken into account. • The global **average wage** for women is about three-fourths of the male wage—ranging from 92% of the male wage in Tanzania to 75% in Belgium, Germany and the US, to 42% in Bangladesh. In many African countries, women contribute up to 80% of the total **food production**, yet receive less than 10% of the credit to small farmers. • In Latin America and the Caribbean, 85% of women can read and write; the **female literacy** rate in South Asia is 34%; in the Arab States, 41%. Every year, about one million children, mostly girls in Asia, are forced into **prostitution.** • Of the 1.3 billion people living in **extreme poverty,** about 70% are women.  Although women constitute half the electorate, they hold only 13% of the seats in the world's **parliaments.**